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**MINDFUL THEATREMAKING:
REFLECTIONS OF *A NEW BRAIN* AND *DEAD MAN'S CELL PHONE*, AND THE ART
OF APPLYING MINDFULNESS IN A DIRECTORIAL PROCESS**

A Thesis Presented

by

GLENN W PROUD III

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTERS OF FINE ARTS

May 2015

Department of Theater

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Approved as to style and content by:

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DEDICATION

To all the people and experiences
that have helped shape and guide me along my path.

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I would like to thank everyone with whom I came into contact each day for his or her energy and support as I struggled, adapted, grew, and transformed as a theatremaker and as a human being.

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ABSTRACT

MINDFUL THEATREMAKING: REFLECTIONS OF A *NEW BRAIN* AND *DEAD MAN'S CELL PHONE*, AND THE ART OF APPLYING MINDFULNESS IN A DIRECTORIAL PROCESS

MAY 2015

GLENN W PROUD III, B.S., ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Gilbert McCauley

In this thesis, I seek to answer if applying the art of mindfulness to my directorial process can provide a greater experience of satisfaction and promote stronger effectiveness in the level of communication and cooperation amongst the collaborative artists in our theatremaking process, compared to previous departmental productions.

This thesis will explore my journey and cultivation of mindfulness from both a personal and artistic perspective. I define the mindfulness-based principles of Mindful Decision Making, Mindful Listening & Loving Speech, and Shifting Negatives to Positives, and provide case studies of their application in my two production processes William Finn's *A New Brain* and Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, which were a part of UMass Amherst Theatre's 2014-2015 season.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

With the productions of William Finn's *A New Brain* and Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone* that I directed in the 2014-2015 season at UMass, my goal was to experiment with how my mindful awareness practice could impact and influence my directorial process and to discover what benefits such an approach might offer. Discovering the way I work best as a theatre artist has been central to my journey as a candidate in the MFA Directing Programing at UMass. The most illuminating part has been the realization that by bringing present minded awareness to my work I have provided collaborators and myself with opportunities to create authentic results with thoughtfulness and attention.

For some time now, I have felt uncomfortable using the term "director" in regards to my work as a theatremaker. If anything, I feel more like a guide in the collaborative process, someone who embodies and encourages selflessness as a means to create a sense of unity that is felt and shared by a team of artists. As William Ball says in *A Sense of Direction*, "When all component parts are in harmony, we have the possibility of a work of art – we have unity" (Ball, 9). To me, the term "director" feels rigid and heavy, and evokes an image of someone who is at the top of a pecking order, commanding minions around him to do his will. I find this image of a "director" negative and unappealing, though it's an image imprinted on me since my days as an undergraduate at Illinois State University when I first learned of George II, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen and his influence on modern theatremaking. In

the introduction of their book *On Directing: Interviews with Directors*, authors Gabriella Giannachi and Mary Luckhurst note, “The established twentieth-century understanding of the director’s role is conventionally traced back to the court theatre of Meiningen in Germany in the late nineteenth century” (XIII). Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy help illuminate George II’s influence by saying, “Although he was assisted by his wife and by his stage manager, he alone was the artistic creator of each production. Everyone in his small theater had to be subservient to the production, whose form he determined and sustained through an iron discipline” (*Directors on Directing*, 22-23). In this context, the term “director” gives me the impression that the role is a male-driven, top down, authoritative means of creating and making theatre. I don’t believe that’s true. I believe that everyone who works on a theatre production shares the responsibility of giving themselves over to that production with their fullest creativity and imagination. Francis Hodge says in his book *Play Directing: Analysis, Communication, and Style*, “the transfer of his ideas must be made through the minds and feelings of others, the challenges for a director lies in his talents for touching the magic springs in others with what he so vividly imagines and feels himself” (7). I do recognize the irony of my uneasiness using the term “director” and at the same time referencing male directors, William Ball and Francis Hodge, who often, if not always, use the pronoun “he” when speaking on directing. The way I reconcile it is that they were writing and practicing at a growing and changing time in society. What is important is the essence of what they were saying. If I remove the “he” from their work, it still speaks to the communal experience I agree and share with them about theatremaking. Whereas I

hear or read “director,” as a “my way, or the high way,” kind of dictator, I actually agree more with Hodge when he says, “the director is a talker, a verbal imagist, for his primary work is communication” (*Play Directing*, 7). I find working in a horizontally collaborative approach to theatremaking a natural fit for my aesthetic. I will loosely use “director” for my work, mainly for paperwork purposes. Otherwise, I have always felt the word “guide” to be more appropriate for my role in the theatremaking process.

Throughout the many stages of my personal and artistic development, I have embraced the awareness that the work we do collectively as theatremakers is bigger than any one individual. This intention drives me, and every artist with whom I create work has my utmost respect and support. When I start a process with a team of artists, I want them to believe me when I express how appreciative I am that they are sharing their time, energy, and talent with the group and me. “Belief is a different ‘apparatus’ than knowledge,” claims Ball. “In our times, belief is more powerful than knowledge. What you believe you are is what you are” (Ball, 7). I am truly thankful, because every participant has *chosen* to be a part of the process and has something unique to contribute and share toward our overall success. I take great delight in creating an atmosphere of encouragement and creative freedom across the board. Having many “cooks” around the pot tossing in ideas and responding to each other’s thoughts and impulses pleases me most. When I witness this collaborative style working successfully and sense that I possibly helped plant the seed of collective growth, it reminds me of a quote from *Living with Joy* by Sanaya Roman. Roman says, “If you focus on bringing out the good in other people,

seeing their beauty and speaking to them of what you love about them, you will find the areas which were giving you problems beginning to resolve themselves, even though you haven't worked directly of finding solutions" (Roman, 37). We are trained and emboldened as artists to respond and react to our impulses, and personally I feel there are no bad ideas when they come from the heart and are guided by our intuition. Guiding my theatremaking process with compassion and trust in the intuition of my fellow theatremakers has been rewarding both personally and artistically. "In the creative process, we seek to encourage the intuitive brain. We have to let intuition know that it will be trusted at every moment, and that whenever intuition feeds us something, we are going to respect it and use it no matter what our critical faculties think" (Ball, 14).

The late William Ball is a theatremaker who greatly influences and inspires my work. After reading his book, *A Sense of Direction*, my aesthetic grew more meaningful and thoughtful, especially in regards to intuition and "positation." In *A Sense of Direction* Ball says:

Intuitive knowledge is always absolutely right. It is impulsive and inviolable. Anyone unaware of this truth is probably clutching too desperately to his intellect. Those who cannot relinquish the stranglehold that their critical judgment exercises over their wayward impulses are probably locked in an ego-bind. Such individuals are ill equipped for leadership in creative endeavors such as playmaking (Ball, 18).

In her book, *The Five Keys to Mindful Communication*, Susan Gillis Chapman defines mindfulness as:

The mind's natural capacity to remember what we are doing in the present moment. This power can weaken with neglect when we practice mindlessness, or can be strengthened with training in mindfulness meditation (205).

Cultivating this style of present-moment awareness has shown me how critical and mindless judgments can incapacitate an artistic process when left unattended.

When the critical brain rears its ugly head with judgment and self-doubt, I remind myself to inhale and exhale, allowing myself to simply breathe. In their book, *Fully Present*, authors Susan Smalley and Diana Winston say, "Catching your emotional reactions early, when they're still small, is a way to alter your actions to keep them from fueling difficult situations" (99). Once the critical voice has been acknowledged, I like to move on and redirect its attention toward positation.

William Ball explains:

By the principle of positation we say yes to every creative idea—doing so yields practical results. We do not say yes to everything for virtue's sake. We say yes because we understand that to do so the practical way of sending a message to the intuition that every creative idea will be valued, respected, and used; and when [an] intuition gets that message often enough, it will send us its most perfect and its most creative ideas (18).

For example, when working in the rehearsal hall with actors, this approach is very effective because it cultivates a sense of play. An actor begins to realize there isn't a

“right” or “wrong” way to obtain a character’s objective, merely more possible actions and tactics in achieving it. Guiding a process rather than “directing” one allows for an experience of selflessness that I feel enhances my work and goals for true collaboration. William Ball states it wonderfully by saying, “That [human] who does not live in awe of something outside [themselves] is dead. The experience of drama is one of those moments in which a human being sits in awe, wonder, and admiration of something of self” (5). Theatremakers are creative people, full of life and expression. Not only do we show the world in which we live, but also the world of what *can be*. Artists possess the skills and potential to stir souls, inspire growth, and demand change. “Creative bursts are key to moving humanity forward. They have been given many names—besides ‘intuition,’ they are also called ‘insight’ or ‘creativity’—and are recognized by scientists and laypersons alike as a key to discovery—and perhaps to authentic happiness” (Smalley and Winston, 127).

But what exactly is “mindfulness?” Mindfulness can be defined in many ways, but Dr. Jeff Brantley and Diana Winston offer definitions that capture the essence of my application best. Brantley defines:

Mindfulness is the awareness that is not thinking but is aware of thinking, as well as of each other ways we experience the sensory world; that is, seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and feeling through the body. Mindfulness is nonjudgmental and openhearted (friendly and inviting of whatever arises in awareness.) It is cultivated by paying attention purposely, deeply, and without judgment to whatever arises in the present moment, either inside or outside of us. By intentionally practicing mindfulness, deliberately paying

more careful moment-to-moment attention, individuals can live more fully and less on 'automatic pilot,' thus being more present in their own lives (39).

The second definition I find useful is from author and Director of Mindfulness Education at the Mindful Awareness Research Center at UCLA, Diana Winston, who states mindfulness as "paying attention to present moment experiences with openness, curiosity, and a willingness to be with what is" (<http://marc.ucla.edu>).

Integrating mindful awareness practice with my directorial process has felt like a natural fit, which leads me to ask the following questions: Can leading a theatrical process with mindfulness based practice provide an experience of extreme satisfaction among its collaborating artists? Can leading a theatremaking process with mindfulness promote stronger effectiveness in the level of communication and cooperation amongst collaborators? By exploring these questions, I hope to help the theatre community recognize the benefits mindful awareness in the arts and how the application of mindfulness may provide rewarding effects, both personally and artistically.

In this thesis, I will first map how using mindfulness has influenced my personal and artistic life. Next, I will discuss key concepts or "principles" that I have identified for myself as beneficial in a theatremaking experience. Lastly, I will reflect on the experience of directing William Finn's *A New Brain* and Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone* and how these "principles" influenced my process and work at certain key moments of each production. Also, I will draw upon feedback received from both *A New Brain* (anonymous) and *Dead Man's Cell Phone* (non-

anonymous) post-production surveys for testimonial and anecdotal evidence that supports how thoughtful attention and intention can create a positive environment that nurtures and cultivates artistic collaboration. My hope is that by reflecting on my productions of William Finn's *A New Brain* and Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone* in this manner, I will illustrate the results of applying mindfulness, as cultivated through an increased sense of awareness and empathy, as well as an evolution from the "doing" state of mindful practice to a "being" state of mindfulness.

CHAPTER 2

CULTIVATING MINDFULNESS PERSONALLY AND ARTISTICALLY

My personal and artistic journey with mindfulness developed and grew during my mid-to-late twenties through my early thirties when I was unhappy, depressed, and in fear of doing self-harm. I knew that I needed to make a change in my life but didn't know how or in what direction. I sought out Zen meditation and read several beginner books of Buddhism, but it was barely scratching at the surface of my suffering. At the time, I did not realize that *I* was the cause. The energy wasted fighting and screaming about what I didn't have control of was overpowering. I felt lost and spent my days on automatic pilot, distracting myself with projects that would keep me from facing the fact I was miserable and considered myself a complete failure. It was a horrible time in my life, but I needed it. "On the other side of every failure is wisdom. Wisdom is growth, growth is progress, and progress is light," says William Ball (45). I hit rock bottom and while it was painful, heartbreaking, and frightening, it was also the wake-up call that I needed to send me down my current path. As Sanaya Roman says, "Everything that happens is meant to help move you into your greater self" (31). It took several years and two mild crashes for me to really settle into the groove of making things work for, not against, me. Working with a psychotherapist in Chicago, I realized how unhappy I was when he asked me a simple question that literally changed my life and perspective: "Have you ever said, 'No?'" The question hit me like a ton of

bricks. He was right. I was constantly saying “yes” to every project that came my way, regardless of time or interest. I had spent five years working a forty-hour weekday job while making theatre in the evenings, serving as Artistic Director of LiveWire Chicago Theatre, and continuing to take on additional side projects. It was then that I realized that I was spreading myself so thin that I could not focus on a few well-done projects. This awareness manifested in the form and sensation of feeling alive and present. Sanaya Roman says: “Do those things that bring aliveness to you. There is a proper mix of focus and daydreaming, intellect and intuition, sitting and movement which brings joy” (126). Running LiveWire Chicago was no longer joyful, and for the organization to grow and prosper, it would be best without my leadership. Even though I knew I had the company’s best interest in mind, it was an extremely difficult decision to make. Yet, at the same time, it was freeing because I knew I needed to take care myself. “By taking care of *you*, putting yourself in an environment that increases your sense of peace and serenity, beauty and harmony, you are much more in a position to assist others than if you put the focus on making them happy and not yourself”, says Roman in *Living with Joy* (190).

My life became attentive and active, and the acceptance into the graduate program reaffirmed my sense of purpose. I attended the Department of Theater’s Open House in the fall of 2012, and went back home to Chicago with the intention of returning back to UMass as a M.F.A. Directing candidate. I began to shift and redirect my energy and focus away from outcomes I didn’t want into outcomes I did want. The results of this shift were incredible. Taking a leap of faith and being

accepted into the highly competitive program not only challenged and nurtured me as an artist but also served as a catalyst for amassing great personal growth.

My first opportunity to direct a main stage production for the Department of Theater was David Ive's *The Liar* in the Fall of 2013. The play was an English language adaptation of the comedy by Pierre Corneille written in 1643. *The Liar* tells the story of Dorante, a young man newly in Paris hoping to find true love. His biggest problem aside from his father trying to marry him off, is that he can never tell the truth. He is compulsive liar driven not by malice, but by the need to embellish. His embellishments get him into all sorts of trouble, though at the end he walks away on top, with everything rightly into place. It's a charming piece of theatre and its perplexities were in the script. The show was great challenge for me as director because I was in uncharted artistic waters. It was my first attempt at directing a period play with heightened language.

When we began the process, I was already bringing to my work an established interest in ego reduction. This made for an extremely smooth, creative, and fun collaborative process with the production team and myself. Actually, I felt more at home in production meetings than I did in rehearsal for a while. Textually speaking, I would have been lost if I had not had Milan Dragicevich as my directing advisor and an undergraduate student of his, Daniel Kadish, as my assistant director. With their assistance and guidance, I was able to find the words I needed to communicate with the actors. However, I feel I did not communicate with the gentlest nature, since I felt rushed and under the gun. It was a large play and my impulse was to set as much of it as I could in the hopes of freeing up more time to

create and explore further down the road. That really wasn't the case, as it turned out. Performers struggled with lines, and I struggled with staging. This resulted in a lot of the "you go here, and you go there," style of directing that I didn't want to be doing. I enjoyed the process and everyone was always having a lot of fun, but my reactivity was in high gear at the time. If someone on stage did something I didn't understand or approve, I would throw my hands into the air or make some kind of audible comment. I was very fortunate that no one took offense or shut down in the process. In hindsight, I know I could have benefited a lot by breathing and allowing myself be present with what was and not giving over to fear. I felt that I had a lot on the line, which manifested in me trying to control things so much that I allowed mindless behavior to creep into the process. *The Liar* was an extremely educational experience for me. It offered me new ways of seeing my process and myself as a director.

My mindfulness practice was kicked into high gear when I was assigned to direct William Finn's *A New Brain* for the Department in the Fall 2014. *A New Brain* tells the story of Gordon Schwinn, a character loosely based the musical's own composer and his life-threatening ordeal. At the start of the musical, Gordon is in an emotional and psychological rut. Unsatisfied with where he is in his life, both personally and professionally, he has become attached to his suffering. I believe we can all relate to how he spends so much of his energy focusing on what he doesn't have. He holds onto the pains of the past, and it is not until he undergoes a life-threatening operation that he awakens to the preciousness of life and what each moment brings. Smalley and Winston, state in their book *Fully Present*:

Most of us spend a great deal of time lost in thoughts about the past or future. Many of our thoughts are about things we regret from the past or things we are worried about in the future. We obsess, worry, grieve, imagine the worst happening in the future, and replay situations from the past that caused us pain. Mindfulness is an antidote to the dullness and disconnection of life lived on automatic pilot (13).

I had never directed a musical before, so it took me quite a while to get into the music. Once I had a copy of the script, so that I could follow along as I listened to the music, my appreciation for the material really began to develop. Having the ability to read the words off the page allowed me to imagine the beauty and complexities of the music in a deeper way. The sensation of heartfelt gratitude and thankfulness that poured from the piece was overwhelming. “Gratitude and thanks are a path straight to the heart, to your essence and your soul”, says Roman (101). It was a refreshing reminder of the preciousness of life and how each present moment must count. Experiences in my life began to take on new meaning. At the same time, I was seeing myself in a different light, which gave way to a conscious commitment to reinvest more time toward the cultivation of my own happiness:

You are a worthy individual, no matter what your past, no matter what your thoughts, no matter who believes in you. You are life it self, growing and expanding and reaching upwards. All people are valuable and beautiful and

unique. Every experience you have had was meant to teach you more about creating love in your life (Roman, 61).

At that time, I was not sure what mindfulness was but I felt its presence. I felt it steering my thoughts and actions with greater compassion, which I directed toward other people around me. While getting deeper into conceptualizing the Fall show, I began meditating with more regularity. A greater sense of ease began to layer itself into how I was processing the show. The anxiety and fear of directing my first musical eventually eased away as I focused on how moving the show was, and the potential it had to lift and stir spirits and souls as it had mine. I wasn't the only one affected by power of the shows script and music. One collaborator responded, "I was able to empathize with Gordon's need for an artistic rebirth at the beginning of this process, and experienced my own cathartic journey right along side him" (Anonymous, personal communication, February 19, 2015). I agree, it was the same for me and *A New Brain* was the show that I needed to direct at that present moment because it awakened in me an inspiration to seek greater clarity and insight through mindful awareness.

From its start over the summer, my expanding awareness deepened in the Fall and was fully embraced and embodied by my Spring production of Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone*. *Dead Man's Cell Phone* is a story of connection, morality, mortality, and the lengths people go to honor the dead. It's a contemporary tale set in our age of selfishness and technological attachment. The play's protagonist, Jean, emerges from her cocoon by responding to the non-stop ringing of a nearby diner's

cellphone at a café. Frustrated by his refusal to respond, she picks it up. By taking the phone call, she is sent on a journey of discovery and transformation, revealing that sometimes the smallest of our life events can provide the greatest impact. *Dead Man's Cell Phone* shows us how we can learn about the world and ourselves if we choose to live life with fullness in the present moment. Smalley and Winston say, "You can learn to take an ordinary experience, give it your present-moment attention, and experience it as extra-ordinary" (13). Both Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone* and William Finn's *A New Brain* deepened my sense of connection and participation in mindfulness practice and have given me the impulse to integrate its principles and concepts in my theatremaking.

One of the challenges I had discovered when I decided to further explore mindfulness practice in the arts was the lack of existing material. I did find articles written by photographers and dance choreographers about how they applied its practices to their work. They were interesting reads, but they did not provide much for me in regards to making theatre. As I increasingly processed the idea of investigating how my deepening practice could be integrated into my directorial work, I started to wonder what impact, if any, it would have on the production process.

Both productions spoke to me as stories of transformation and discovery. Most plays are transformative tales; we don't go to the theater only to walk away from the experience without witnessing some kind of journey taking place. As I read and became even more familiar with both pieces, I was rousingly aware of the mindful elements that were present in both works. This could be due to the fact that

most of my attention had already been focused in that direction. Smalley and Winston even note that, “Mindfulness is a method to clean the lens of our experience” (176). My mindful awareness practice was providing me with a growing sense of awareness toward those issues and themes. I began to gain better appreciation of myself by shifting the focus from my “self” to the world around me.

Smalley and Winston tell us:

Modern society tends to condition us to be anything but mindful. The dominant American culture validates mindless productivity, busy-ness, speed, and efficiency. The last thing we want to do is just *be* present. We want to *do*, to succeed, to produce (17).

CHAPTER 3

FOUR INFLUENTIAL CONCEPTS OF MINDFULNESS

For me, the idea of exploring mindfulness in the theatre production model is unique and exciting. From what I have read and researched, there is not much out there on the topic, if anything at all. I think the theatre model is an excellent platform for such a case study because the very nature of theatremaking calls upon participants to live in the present moment with one another. Whether as a performer, designer, or member of the production staff, the practice of mindfulness can be a powerful asset when encountering stressful situations in rehearsal halls and production meetings. Over the last three years, my process has evolved quite a bit. The deeper that I have cultivated mindfulness, the more it has been influencing and driving my work in positive ways. I don't hide my enthusiasm and passion for this style of theatremaking because I feel that by bringing attention and awareness to it "mirror neurons" may fire off. This could result in a group of collective artists collaborating and communicating with less stress, fear, and ego. Smalley and Winston define mirror neurons as, "cellular mechanism for how you know what another person is feeling; they fire when you see another person experiencing or doing something, as if you yourself were experiencing it or doing it" (*Fully Present*, 126). By using this awareness, I have integrated a few mindful principles into my directorial process with the intention of fostering satisfaction and greater communication within my production process. Four principles, or concepts, that I have found best aid my work are (1) Mindful Decision Making, (2) Mindful Listening

and (3) Loving Speech, and (4) Shifting Negatives into Positives. I am fascinated and encouraged by this work. I believe the theatre world and community can benefit a great deal from this application. David Rome and Hope Martin tap into my deeper sentiment when they say in their article *Are You Listening?:*

If enough people in our culture can learn and practice these inner skills, a shift from highly dysfunctional to highly functional modes of communication can happen, offering hope that we can enjoy healthier, more fulfilling relationships with the people in our personal lives and all those with whom we share community, country, and planet (218).

CHAPTER 4

MINDFUL DECISION MAKING

Since I began practicing mindfulness and Mindful Decision Making I have noticed it aiding my decision making process with positive results. As Smalley and Winston state, “By practicing present-time awareness, *even in the midst of a difficult situation*, you can become aware of your impulses (your reactive patterns), stop, perhaps take a breath, and respond skillfully in a way that does not lead to more harm” (15). Genetically, I was born with proneness toward impulsive behavior and, until recently, was known to make snap decisions and judgments. Prior to my graduate career, I used to be the king of “love it or hate it” and rarely found the middle ground between the two. One instance of this type of impulsivity and reactivity occurred a couple years before starting graduate school. I was directing a production for my theatre company and the organization hired an outside production manager who was not used to our theatre model. I found it hard to do my job as the director because I felt as though I was doing their job, as well. Instead of reaching out to the individual and expressing how I felt, I callously went out of my way to have them removed from the production. That was an unfortunate situation that I could have handled more mindfully. In hindsight, if I had just taken a breath and found my inner calm, I would have realized that they weren’t set up to succeed by the producers. Having the pendulum swing so far in either direction doesn’t serve my directorial process well. Having this awareness reminds me of the daily work and practice it takes to stay moment-to-moment and in the present. Smalley

and Winston say, “With the practice of mindfulness, we can catch ‘better than/less than’ thoughts before they turn into action and thus reduce the possibility that we will engage in harmful actions” (216). Prior to integrating mindfulness into my directing process, I was notorious for shooting my mouth off or firing from the hip. Sometimes that tactic can be beneficial for a production, but on others projects, not so much. I had no awareness of the outcomes my actions caused by taking that approach, but since then I have become more aware of how I relate to the present moment. With this awareness, I have been able to cultivate a greater sense of balance, or *equanimity*. Smalley and Winston define equanimity as, “A state of even-mindedness or balance” (224). They go on further to say, “Equanimity is not a state of disassociation for dispassion but in fact a very connected state of mind” (Smalley and Winston, 136). I find this to be quite accurate with how I have been processing situations as of late. Allowing myself to sit longer with my thoughts and focus on my breath while weighing the possible outcomes has been instrumental to my recent growth. “With mindfulness, you increase your level of discernment—that is, your capacity to detect a thought before it becomes an action—and in this discernment you create a greater capacity to pause and choose among alternate actions” (Smalley and Winston, 177).

The willingness and ability to accept such “pause” into my life and work has been very rewarding. Not only has it allowed proper balance to manifest for me in the moment, but it also provides a refreshing sense of ease that being present with the breath promotes. Dropping into the self in such a way and allowing a certain level of detachment to take place is quite refreshing. “Mindfulness practice begins

inside a single individual. Each of us, working to regulate our attention, reduces our reactivity, cultivate more positive emotions, can improve our own health and happiness” (211). Decisions that I have made from this state of awareness have been very informative to my process because I had started to allow myself greater freedom to take my time and seek out other outlets of input. In her article, *Why Mindful Individuals Make Better Decisions*, Natalia Karelaia states, “Research shows that people who are more mindful are also more aware of their ethical principles and make decisions aligned to those values. This links mindfulness with authenticity” (knowledge.insead.edu). Authenticity is a really important trait to have when confronted with difficult decisions because there are always so many individuals and countless factors to consider. Weighing the positives with the negatives, seeking consultation and advice from advisors, and processing the situation with members of the production team have always helped me to further reflect and, ultimately, make a decision from a place of clarity and confidence.

Sanaya Roman says:

Clarity is reached by training the mind to be precise and accurate in its definition of experience. Clarity means that you are focused and living at a level of energy that others cannot interfere with. The clearer your energy is, the less affected you will be by other people, the less touched you will be by other people’s expectations or desires, and the clearer will be your path in life (*Living with Joy*, 135).

I was thrilled when I read from one team member from *A New Brain* say, “The most important thing that I learned during this process was how to take multiple opinions and options of a route into consideration, and combining them to meet the needs of the particular show/situation” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 19, 2015). This kind of awareness is crucial to collaboration and I am humbled to have provided this individual with an opportunity to witness this style of decision-making in action.

The productions of *A New Brain* and *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* that I directed this season have allowed me wonderful opportunities to practice Mindful Decision Making. Each production process was interesting, beneficial, and productive in different ways because of where I was in my mindful awareness practice at the time. With *A New Brain*, I was in the early stages of my awareness-building and was faced with a tough decision regarding a spiral staircase, and with *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*, I had been practicing for eight months and came to a moment in the process where I had to consider cutting a major performance component. Both instances put my mindfulness to the test and now, with a certain amount of distance from both episodes, I can reflect with greater objectivity.

A New Brain: Spiral Staircase To Heaven

Throughout *A New Brain* there were many instances where I incorporated Mindful Decision Making into my process. The situation that stands out most to me surrounds the decision I had to make regarding a particular scenic element that went through much debate and contention. It was the infamous spiral staircase, or what I like to refer to as the Issue of a Non-Issue. It was an episode that really allowed me to drop in and test my mindful mettle. To be quite honest, there were days that the topic almost got the best of me. One survey responder noted, “From the initial meeting forward, I knew we were working in a positive, Glenn Proud experience. Our conversation surrounding the development of the spiral staircase made that context clear” (Anonymous, personal communication February 19, 2015).



Figure 1: The Infamous Spiral Staircase

When I heard I would be directing Williams Finn's *A New Brain* in the Curtain Theater, I was immediately excited. The two things that excited me the most right from the start were that it would be the first musical I had directed, as well as my first production in that performance venue. Over the summer I met several times with my Lighting and Scenic Designers, James Horban and Stacie St. Louis, and we were all delighted by the suggestion of the production being staged in three-quarter thrust. At one of our initial meetings, we came to consensus that we all shared the same desire to use the mezzanine. Primarily, it would be used for band placement purposes, but it also would keep the option open to explore using a portion of space for performance, as well.



Figure 2: Mr. Bungee descends the staircase

We continued to meet and collaborate and landed upon the idea of using the mezzanine as an entrance for the character Mr. Bungee, Gordon's real life boss, who terrorizes him throughout the play in dreams, nightmares, and other moments where Gordon becomes overwhelmed and paralyzed by self-doubt. Having Mr. Bungee emerge from the clouded and troubled reaches of Gordon's mind from an area of height and dominance seemed to work well and went along with the oppressive stranglehold Gordon's toxic work environment had on him. In order to achieve this idea, we brainstormed ways in which we could move an actor from the mezzanine to floor level. The idea of a staircase was proposed.

I really enjoyed the idea of a staircase connecting the stage to the mezzanine, especially if it could provide opportunity for multiple uses and locations. At that time of conceptualization, I was not sure where the best location for the world existed because much of the show and its scene take place in Gordon's head and I knew that a hospital room had to be the anchor environment. When it came to the idea of the staircase, I knew we had to be careful of not bringing it so far downstage that it would cut off audience members that may sit in the left and right sides of the thrust. To make sure that this wouldn't be the case, our scenic designer proposed a spiral staircase.

I immediately latched onto the idea of the spiral staircase because its corkscrew image reminded me of both the drill bit of a screw gun and a turbine. The drill bit structure brought to mind the act of drilling into Gordon's psyche and, metaphorically, his head and future operation. The turbine looked as if it was instigating the downward spiral of Gordon and representing his life spinning out of

control. It was such a great idea that none of us imagined the tension that would arise from the proposal at one of the last preliminary design meetings.

Conflict first arose after Stacie presented her set model. At the time, the spiral staircase wasn't represented accurately. She presented one that had the staircase emptying out upstage and under the mezzanine. I was aware of the problem that would have created. But I was confident the stair unit, when built, would be adjusted to make it exit downstage as possible. I understood that the scenic element wasn't within the budget of our production, but it was the production's only necessary scenic unit. For that reason, the Scene Shop agreed to make an investment by constructing it so that it would be a stock purchase that could be used in future Curtain Theater productions. In a way, I felt it was an investment in the team and myself, as well. I had several productive and informative meetings regarding the spiral staircase with my directing advisor Gina Kaufmann, choreographer Melissa Cleary, and production manager, Julie Fife to discuss the issue. What I appreciated from all of the discussions was that everyone had not only the show, but also my best interests in mind. The interesting thing that I noticed about myself in these interactions was how mindless and reactive I would become, depending on which individual I would speak with. In one meeting, I would be assessing the situation with my normal level of equanimity, which could have read as aloof or naïve based by the understanding that it was my first musical. In another situation, I would react mindlessly, allowing myself to become reactive, impulsive, and feeling the need to defend the choices my design team and I made. My thoughts and emotions were getting the best of me and I was no longer

processing mindfully, with balance, in the moment. The awareness of this usually occurred shortly after an event or meeting. To combat the lapse of being in the moment, I would remind myself of breath awareness while shifting my focus toward appreciating the work in which we were all invested. The ability to notice this inner-awareness was encouraging because it provided me with the opportunity to lift my attention toward the outer set of circumstances.

I began to weigh out the options that were presented to me. On the “con” side of the spiral staircase debate was the fact that the rotation of the spiral staircase would have our actors descending with their backs to the audience and exiting slightly up stage. The small width and lack of anchoring support would minimize weight capacity and opportunities for choreographic dance moments. Suggestions were made to either scrap the entire idea of the stair unit, or to campaign the Shop for a movable rolling stair unit to provide versatility. Neither suggestion jumped out to me as attractive options. I then turned my attention and considered the “pros” of the spiral staircase. It was being custom built for us, not taken out of our budget, and actors who ascended the staircase would face downstage offering opportunities to stay visible to the audience. I was also sure it would still provide effective moments of choreography that could be staged with mindful attention to the unit’s limits.

I meditated on everyone’s opinions, thoughts, and suggestions, weighed the pros with the cons, and sat with mindful awareness as a final decision came to me in favor of the staircase. I based my final decision on the needs of the story that the production team, as a whole, was trying to tell. One discovery made that pleased

everyone was that the needed handrail on the staircase did not have to extend down to the last step, which created more flexibility for movement up and down the unit. I had to take a leap of faith about the staircase decision but because I had taken time to process the issue with others, it allowed me time to reflect. As one anonymous collaborator says, “In a true collaboration, there should be no fear.” A passage from *The Buddha Walks Into The Office* sums the experience up nicely for me:

When you face tough decisions, there will only be yes or no. There are not a lot of maybes when you are fearless, because you are genuine and thus you see the logic behind why things need to happen. Having determined the logical way forward, you know you ought to act decisively, and you feel the impetus to follow through on that logic. That is fearlessness at work (Rinzler, 151).



Figure 3: Gordon and the Ensemble

Dead Man's Cell Phone: Decision To Dance

What I enjoy most about mindfulness is that each new day offers opportunities to practice present-moment awareness. Mindful Decision Making has greatly enhanced my directorial process since *A New Brain* closed. It has helped guide me through a particularly tricky week of rehearsal for *Dead Man's Cell Phone*. The play has only six characters but I had the idea of casting a movement/transition ensemble for the production. I wanted to experiment with how they might poetically enhance the story's arc as they transformed the environment from scene to scene. I saw these individuals not as people necessarily but as energies that receive and produce Jean's stimuli. They affect Jean as they guide her along the path of transformation and connection creating an almost mirror, neuron-like essence.



Figure 4: Ensemble surprised by their sudden courage

Rehearsal had been going well up until the eighth week when the energy shifted to a less than positive tone. In retrospect, I feel that some of it had to do with how rehearsals were structured. Our rehearsal schedule was not easy, and I found myself running from room to room most evenings. For about a two-week period, I was shifting attention between working with the ensemble and principle casts. Though my focus was consistently shifting, I felt even more immersed in the work. I would rehearse with the show's principle actors, while, in another room, the ensemble was creating and shaping the story of the transitions. This allowed me to run back and forth between the two rehearsals.

This approach lasted for several weeks and our plan was to come back from spring break and integrate the transitions into the scenes. I felt by doing this, we would be well-prepared for our first run-through of the show for the designers, which was scheduled for that Thursday. The plan was to integrate Act 1 on Monday and Act 2 on Tuesday, giving us the full time on Wednesday to put the entire show together. Working like this allowed us to continue adjusting moments to fit the story best, but by the end of the day on Tuesday, I began to feel like the cast was putting unnecessary stress upon them by over-complicating the work and getting too in their heads. On Wednesday, we attempted a stumble-through of the entire show to see what we had at this stage prior to our first Design Run. The lack of focus was alarming. The ensemble was distracting itself by talking backstage or becoming buried in their phones while off-stage, and they weren't focusing on the story of the show, leading to unnecessary mistakes and causing confusion for them and frustration for me. By the end of the week, I felt that everyone realized how

much work was left. However, instead of seeing it as an opportunity to continue creating and playing, they took it as a sign that they weren't doing it "right", causing frustration and tension to build. Alex Olms, my Stage Manager, processed what was going on with me but didn't know the specifics as to why people were disheartened. This saddened me, and while I wanted to ease their fears and boost their spirits, I knew that this moment was the time I needed to sit and process things further, trusting that the right words and right moment would be found when it was needed.

After the design run, I mentioned to the ensemble that we would be modifying and enhancing transitions as we continued to create our play. In hindsight, that was the moment when tension rose. The ensemble may have felt that adjustments were punishment or that what they had created was not working, which was not the case. It was simply that I was only able to notice opportunities to make the intention behind the inclusion of the dance transition element clearer *after* linking the scenic and movement moments together. Nonetheless, I still sensed frustration and possible resentment creeping into the rehearsal space. I found it troubling because it's not how I like to work. It was a big pill to swallow. My desire to collaborate with these artists and create a dynamic visual concept that I had for the show was actually causing unhappiness and that made me feel sad.

As rehearsals continued, I found myself so distracted by the thoughts of their unhappiness that I began to entertain the idea of cutting the ensemble from the play entirely. That wasn't a path I wanted to take because it would have meant scrapping a lot of the conceptualization for the show. At the same time, negative energy in rehearsal wasn't serving the production, either. I gave myself time to sit with that

feeling and process the situation with my stage management team (Alex and his assistant, Genn Shepard), Webster, Julie, and my faculty advisor, Gilbert McCauley. What I enjoyed most and found quite beneficial with this group of people was that no one tried to solve the problem or tell me what to do. They were as open and present with me as I was with them. Everyone gave me the impression that they would encourage and support whatever decision I ended up making. After receiving input from them, I decided to take an evening to sit alone and process the situation further to come to a decision that would benefit everyone.



Figure 5: Ensemble and Jean encounter the Other Woman

The following evening, my plan was to do a check-in with the ensemble and gauge if they were still committed, but I was having trouble finding the proper words to say to them. Since the Fall semester, I have felt more contemplative and compassionate. I also noticed that I am less reactive than I was in the past, allowing me to be more present and attentive to feelings. Instead of a formal “sit down”

meeting, I causally sat with the ensemble as if I was passing the time before moving on with the principle cast. We chatted about what was going on with them outside rehearsal before I steered the conversation around to the show. Once we did, I reiterated how appreciative I was of all their hard work and acknowledged that the process had been difficult at times for them. My suggestion was to redirect their energy and find renewed excitement in the opportunity to continue creating the show. Having that time with them, I was able to re-explain my concept for the transitions and how their “characters” served as agents of change and transformation for Jean. I told them that I felt that they were manifestations of Jean. Jean was each of them and they were Jean. To aid in the clarification of this very metaphysical concept, I sent them a documentary video that cut through the surface of my concept more clearly than I could articulate. I don’t know if it was the special attention I gave them, or the additional clarification of their roles in the show, or both, but by the time we were about to end regular rehearsals and go into technical weekend rehearsals, I noticed a tremendous attitude and energy shift. The attitude adjustments led me to believe things were beginning to manifest toward a more positive and fruitful outcome with ensemble energy. Whatever had been in the air the in prior evenings was no longer present and they all came to work and create. I felt an incredible sense of joy and fun emanating from them. This encouraged me to go with initial instinct, stay the course, and keep the transition element as originally conceived. The ensemble never knew I was so close to cutting the whole thing because I didn’t want to taint their experience. Instead, I wanted to recognize their accomplishments and the fact that they are the seeds of their own artistic creation

and growth. In reference to how that tricky situation was handled and its outcome Julie says: “The integration of the ensemble benefited from your work. You held it together and continued to work on your vision, bringing it to a more successful integration than any of us imagined was possible” (J. Fife, personal communication, April 22, 2015).

My experience of mindfulness has deepened over the last nine months and has been so rewarding. The seed of mindfulness was planted prior to the *A New Brain* process, and now it’s blossoming as ripe fruit for the picking with the experience of *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*. My knowledge and awareness of Mindful Decision Making has cultivated a deeper present-moment awareness that is nurturing and supporting the sense of unity I feel as a theatremaker.



Figure 6: Ensemble, Jean and Gordon in the Cell Phone Ballet

CHAPTER 5

MINDFUL LISTENING AND LOVING SPEECH

The second and third principles I explore, Mindful Listening and Loving Speech, really go hand-in-hand. I am grouping them together because they are at the core of why I feel the cultivation of these practices aid communication in theatremaking. Living a mindful existence that incorporates both deep listening and right speech is a personal goal of mine. Like all goals and intentions, some days you really fire off on all cylinders and other days, not so much. For me meditating has been a morning ritual and an opportunity to jump-start my awareness to moments when I “get on the train” and end up doing or saying something mindlessly. The key here is forgiveness. When I find myself acting mindlessly in situations, rather than beating myself up over it, I try to reframe it as an educational moment and a time to further develop my process.

Communication is a critical component in how we relate to the world around us, and, even more so, how we relate to ourselves. Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh says in his book *The Art of Communication*, “If you don’t communicate well with yourself, you cannot communicate well with another person” (22). That speaks to me because so often we carry with us that inner voice that is always judging and critiquing our every word and action. If we allow ourselves to get caught up in only paying attention to the narrative of our inner critic, how will we ever find the freedom and liberation the present moment offers us? In *Living with Joy*, Sanaya Roman says, “Communication is one area that controls the life you live and the

forms you attract. When you speak precisely and clearly, when you know the intent of your communication, you will find your experience of others in the world changing” (153). I can attest to that. Since centering myself on mindfulness, I have incorporated a daily practice of mindful mediation and have noticed a presence within me that has allowed me to be more attuned, open and alive with everyone around me. “Our dialogue was uninhibited, fervent, and free-flowing, and we developed a strong trust and confidence between ourselves that allowed for a freeing and fruitful collaboration,” notes one *A New Brain* member of the process. No longer do I feel shy or withdrawn, but actually more curious and ready to engage with the world. As a result, I have had some of the best spontaneous conversations with complete strangers. Being present with others, taking in their energy and offering some of mine back has created palpable change within me and reaffirms my sense of humanity. Smalley and Winston say:

Harmonious relationships stem from a foundation in speaking and listening with mindfulness. Mindful Speech is also truthful, thoughtful, and nondivisive (sic). Mindful listeners are those who make you feel heard and understood and who offer a natural presence and kindness just by virtue of their listening skill (215).

As director and guide on a production, there is no ignoring the fact that many people are looking to me to lead the collaborative process in a way that offers support and encouragement. I feel that to be a successful communicator one must be a good listener, and have found Susan Gillis Chapman’s work and book *The Five*

Keys to Mindful Communication to provide a helpful metaphor when it comes to Mindful Listening. Chapman offers a familiar image of a traffic light as a means of becoming aware of communication when it's either closed, open, or is in-between. She refers to Red-Light Emotions as closed or broken down communication. Red-Light Emotions are manifested in states of fear and are usually a result of past experiences or worrying about the future and events to come. They are wild negative manifestations in the mind that keep us from grounding our responses in any sort of reality. Chapman says, "When we practice mindfulness, we observe that these toxic emotions have no basis in reality. Red-light emotions are forms of mindlessness" (67). When communication stops or breaks down, we can overcome the lack of flow by being present and not falling victim to habitual patterns of response or listening to the internal voices of judgment and critique in our heads. On the opposite end of Red Light Emotion is Open, or Green Light Emotions, which are kind, gentle responses which are suited to the moment because they are present with what is and not clouded by internal thoughts. "All green-light emotions, even anger, are essentially expressions of empathy. They arise when we listen with an open heart, feeling as one with the joy and pain of other people" (Chapman, 66). When communication is open, there is a sense of flow that manifests in thoughts of "we" instead of "me" in relationships and other situations. In the middle of the two we have Yellow-Light Emotions. These emotions tell us to ease up and slow down. They hit us with states of shock where we might feel a bit off and not quite connected in a given moment. Communication has not yet broken down by our inward thinking, but we are more responsive of things or situations not going as

thought or planned, and this allows fear to set in. “Instead of responding to the present moment, these fragments of fear contribute to a background sense of being cut off from ourselves” (Chapman, 70).

Being aware and perceptive of these emotions when communicating can help with awareness-building and keeps us from projecting our own problems or fears onto an issue during conversation. Increasing numbers of studies and research have been supporting this kind of level of deep listening. In their book, *Words Can Change Your Brain*, Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman tell us, “Brain-scan research shows, the more deeply we listen, the more our brain will mirror the activity in the other’s brain. This is what allows us to truly understand another person and to empathize with their sorrows and joys” (9).

One of the reasons why I love what I do is because I get to create with my fellow artistic collaborators. It’s pleasing that my commitment to open communication has had a positive impact for one *A New Brain* designer:

There were no bad ideas, and everyone was able to contribute outside of their area of design to really find the nuts and bolts of the experience we were out to create. This was freeing. There were no ‘departmental politics’ or people being steamrolled, which allowed for a free exchange and conversation of ideas that I had not previously experienced at this institution (Anonymous, personal communication, February, 19 2015).

I enjoy keeping communication loose and free flowing, and I always try to remain present and available with an open mind and heart. The writings of Thich Nhat

Hanh have provided me with some of the best insights and awareness of how I enjoy and utilize verbal communication. He refers to his method of communication as “loving speech.” In his book *Work*, Hahn says, “Using loving speech means speaking with love, compassion, and understanding. We try not to use words of blaming or criticizing. We speak calmly, with understanding, using only words that inspire confidence, joy, and hope in others” (64). He goes further to say, “Loving speech invites other people to express themselves and their difficulties. We must be honest, we must be open, and we must also be ready to listen” (65).

By incorporating both the concepts of Mindful Listening and, especially, of Loving Speech into my production process, I have found myself experiencing fruitful and engaged communication in the production meetings of both *A New Brain* and *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*. The practice and cultivation of mindfulness has steered my production processes for both shows this season and I wanted to look deeper within myself when asking the question, “Can leading a theatremaking process with mindfulness promote stronger effectiveness in the level of communication and cooperation amongst collaborators?” To help me answer this question about my theatremaking process, I created a production survey for my collaborators. With *A New Brain*, I had asked for anonymous feedback, but with *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* I didn’t ask for the same format due to the quick turn around time of the show and thesis. I sent the survey out to both production teams and had thirteen of them respond with feedback. (It would have been great to have more returned, but I realize both surveys came out at the end of the semester, a hectic and stressful time due to final exams and projects.) I value the thoughtful attention paid to the

feedback provided on the questionnaires and feel encouraged by their responses to continue cultivating an art of mindful theatremaking.

A New Brain: Costuming Possibility

As a director, attending production meetings is one of my favorite tasks. There is something about being in a room full of artists working on a collaborative endeavor that is very exciting to me. I love sitting around sharing ideas about how we each interpret the story and discovering what strikes us about certain moments in the play. It is a time of vision and imagination as we explore the possible ways our event can play out onstage. It is a room full of potential, where every idea is a seed of thought that must be listened to and attended to so that it has the opportunity to grow and flourish. “An encouraging leader is like a gardener who can envision a flower in every seed and makes an effort to cultivate that potential in others” (Chapman, 50). During my time here in the Department of Theater, I’ve developed quite the green thumb and I pride myself on the quality of soil I offer my collaborators.

When working on *A New Brain*, I had the pleasure of collaborating with two undergraduate students, Erin Mabee and Chris Hynds, who were selected to co-design the production. From our first moments of conversations at an informal preliminary design meeting, I was impressed by their energy and enthusiasm. They seemed like a great fit to work with my style of collaboration. I like to explore all the possible ideas, influences, and inspirations so we all can sift through and draw out what mutually strikes and attracts us.

Speaking to this style of collaboration, a production member notes:

I felt that this show exemplified the success of unhindered, [un-political] teamwork, and not just between the director and me. Every moment working on this show was fueled by the fact that everyone was working together and having a really great time (Anonymous, personal communication, February, 19 2015).

Early on in the process I set the intention that the production we were creating was indeed “our” show. For it to manifest in a way where everyone is not only personally, but artistically invested, each and every one of us has to commit and contribute fully without the fear and hesitation of receiving backlash from peers or faculty advisors.

My main goal for working with the design team of *A New Brain* was to remove any possible obstruction that would keep the team from expressing themselves and not allowing their artistic talent to flourish. With that intention as my mantra, I was excited for our first preliminary design meeting, where I could hear where each design area’s impulses and inspirations were taking them. At this stage of the collaborative process, mindfulness is essential. Creative thoughts and ideas are still in their infancy and need to develop and grow no matter how outlandish or “left field” an impulse may seem. Practicing mindfulness has been extremely beneficial for my process because it has allowed me to let go and be less reactive of the initial thoughts that come swirling into my head. When I hear an idea or suggestion I disagree with, instead up getting caught up in thoughts about it, I

place my awareness in my breath in order to listen deeper. “Coming back into the present moment by letting go of thoughts does not require that you eliminate creative ruminations, reflections on the past, or your thoughts. You can exert some control over them rather than being at their mercy” (Smalley and Winston, 14).

As Erin and Chris began to speak of their experience reading the script and listening to its music, my ear immediately got pulled when I heard Erin mention that, “We don’t want them (the hospital staff) to be in scrubs.” There was no denying that an emotion of embarrassment washed over me. In that moment I felt a sensation of hot tingling starting from the center of my chest that radiated throughout my body. I knew I needed to handle the next moments delicately, so I sat quietly taking everything in, including the thoughts and ideas Erin and Chris were expressing, and my own physical and emotional sensations. The awareness I was experiencing in my body allowed the necessary pause I needed in order to receive the rest of their presentation with an open green-light of emotion. Susan Gillis Chapman refers to green-light emotions as, “intelligent and appropriate responses to the events in our environment. They arise before we divide our experience into me and you” (Chapman, 66). Erin and Chris’s presentation included a hyper-stylized hospital world that was like no other, with latex style clothing, extreme make up, and a Mr. Bungee that was part-Frankenstein, part-fashion runway model. Those ideas played well into Gordon’s dreams and the nightmarish nature of the episodes Gordon faced. They were all machinations of the mind, which I appreciated. The two of them displayed a clear understanding of how difficult the show was to design when so much of the story was told through moments that shifted between reality, a

heightened, dream-like reality, and coma-induced fantasy. I admired their creative impulses and fearlessness of diving right in and making a bold choice. I found their concept to be quite attractive and cool, but the struggle I had with it was that if the world was so extreme from the start where was the “reality,” and would that be a reality our audiences could relate with when they experience the show?

As Erin and Chris wrapped up their remarks, I could sense a vibe in the room that everyone was eagerly awaiting my response. In an almost mind/energy melding moment, I sensed exactly what my directing advisor Gina Kaufmann was experiencing. She was sitting off to my left, slightly back and without making eye contact. I subtly placed my hand on the ankle of her crossed over leg with the intent to non-verbally communicate, “I know what you are thinking, but don’t worry. I’ve got this.” I felt sure and steady in that moment because the entire time they were presenting, I was completely focused on them. I was present in the moment and conscience of my breath while processing their ideas with respect and gentle curiosity. “When your mind is relaxed and at ease you feel impartial and balanced, and you are experiencing equanimity” (Smalley and Winston, 136). I thanked them both. It was truly a creative and inventive vision for the show and I appreciated their thoughtfulness, but I did have reservations. After a short pause to gather the right words, I began to process their proposal with them and the rest of the team. As Thich Nhat Hanh says in *The Art of Communication*, “The one who speaks has to be very mindful, using words in a way that can help the listener not be caught in wrong perceptions” (50).



Figure 7: Mr. Bungee

My big questions for the costume design team was how their choices served the story. If audience members were seeing the show for the first time or not avid theatregoers, would these design choices enhance the storytelling and their experience of the show? Would audiences understand that Gordon was in a hospital? Would the impression be clear that Mr. Bungee was a daytime children's show performer? Though steered toward an actor/director relationship, I find this quote to apply just as nicely working with any artistic collaborator: "A skilled director's sentences are questions. When the director limits himself [themselves] as much as possible to asking questions, the actor develops a habit of right answers" (Ball, 51). I wanted to make sure they didn't feel I was negating their creative input and contribution. In fact, by jumping into the project the way they did, the designers provided me with the impulse I needed to make sure all elements were speaking to the story. One collaborator shared, "I never felt shut down, I always felt that my

ideas were given a [fair] shake before incorporated or repurposed. Ideas were never eliminated” (Anonymous, personal communication, February, 19 2015). Getting everyone on the same page is important and having that interaction really helped us all pull up to the same table:

The more those unspoken agreements can be spoken, the clearer you will be. Many disappointments and problems occur when agreements are not clear, when one person follows one set of agreements, and the other follows another. Both can operate from clarity, but if they are not communicating, there can be confusion (Roman, 136).



Figure 8: Nancy D convinces Gordon to sign the release as the Doctor and Minister look on

Their work was great. Erin and Chris were able to create and execute a design that displayed the off-kilter nature of the extreme characters that lived and manifested in the tone and shape-shifting world of William Finn’s *A New Brain*. At the same time, it grounded them in a truth with which the audiences could identify.

Practicing Mindful Listening and Loving Speech in this moment allowed communication to thrive and creativity to flourish. In a production process, if we allow ourselves to be open and come from a place of compassion, communication can be a rewarding two-way street. This passage from *The Art of Communication* guides my theatremaking:

After we have deeply listened and allowed the other person to express everything in his heart, we'll have a chance to later on to give him a little of the information he needs to correct his perception—but not now. Now we just listen, even if the person says things that are wrong. It's the practice of mindfulness of compassion that keeps us listening deeply (Hanh, 44).

Dead Man's Cell Phone: "Hello, Babar!" or Addressing the Elephant in the Room

In *The Art of Communication*, Thich Nhat Hanh says, "When, in a work environment, you use mindful and compassionate speech, you're offering the best of your-self. If we can combine our insights and experiences the collective insight will bring about the wisest decisions" (119). This essence of mindfulness is what guides and propels my theatremaking energy, and having that awareness has served me well in production meetings where emotions have a tendency to run high.

One particular instance was during *Dead Man's Cell Phone's* final design presentation where things got a little heated between Lighting Designer C. Webster Marsh, and Scenic Designer Miguel Romero. The whole thing was quite silly, but I can see where the tension immediately began to occur. As co-production dramaturge, Sam Doolittle, recalls:

"There was a moment where I visibly saw you exercise your mindfulness practice—there was some kind of disagreement between members of the design team, and you paused the conversation to check in and see how everyone was doing. It seems to alleviate the tensions, which was good" (personal communication, April 15, 2015).

The focus of the production meeting was to finalize production designs, mainly in the areas of costume and scenic design. Lila West, our costume designer, presented her final character renderings for approval, which were fantastic, fit well within the budget, and had the full support of the costume shop. At that time, there

wasn't much to present in regards to the scenic design because, weeks earlier, Miguel had already presented his design concept. All the same, things sometimes move and shift slightly which can change needs from other departments. Like Miguel, Webster had already previously presented his "mood boards" that spoke to his visual concept for the show and, at this time, was in need of a few more specifics from scenic so he could move forward with the light plot he had due. The light plot is used as a blueprint to position, hang, and focus lighting instruments, as well as get an idea of what gels to use for instruments. The gels enhance the colors and textures of the clothes the costumer designer had chosen for the production.

I was following along intently to every presentation and answering questions that came up, but otherwise, I sat back while placing my attention and awareness on my breath. This allowed all of the creative ideas to pour over me so I could offer my pure presence to the group. "When you are mindful of the body, instead of ignoring or distrusting it, you take the information it gives you and use it as guidance that is just as valuable as your cognitive knowing" (Smalley and Winston, 69). The meeting had been going well like every meeting prior, but things took an awkward shift when Webster asked about the intended placement of scenic panels and was greeted with a rather short and a louder-than-normal answer. The entire team was taken aback, since up until this point every production meeting had been well-processed and mutually stimulating on all design fronts. I couldn't tell whether Miguel was upset or passionate, and it felt as if the air had been sucked out the room. I continued to let them process, hoping that Webster's questions would be answered, but as the meeting moved forward, it became apparent that Webster had

unintentionally hit a nerve. No one knew what to do, especially since the moment came upon us so fast. Hanh says, “Often at work we don’t give ourselves time or space to recognize and embrace these strong emotions, so our tension comes out in unintentional ways. This can make communication difficult” (*The Art of Communication*, 125). Miguel went on to explain that, though the meeting was the “final” design production meeting, things are hardly ever final and always subject to change. After he said that, I better understood Miguel’s point of view. Webster did, as well, but there were still pressing questions he needed to have answered in order to move forward on deadlines that were due for his advisors.

I gazed around the room and witnessed how stiff and heavy the air in the room had become. What I saw reminded me of Susan Gillis Chapman’s description of “Yellow-Light Emotions,” which, “begins with a little jolt – the shock and disorientation that comes when we realize we’re out of step with reality...mixed up with confused ideas” (*The Five Keys to Mindful Communication*, 69). They apparently both came to an agreement. I say “apparently” because, during the tail end of their tête-à-tête, I completely checked out. In that moment my mind drifted to something I had read that stated, “Remind yourself that a difficult situation is only temporary, getting overly upset about a situation will not change its outcome” (Smalley and Winston, 137). Thich Nhat Hanh shares that idea and sentiment when he talks about ways to keep communication open. He explains that emotions are impermanent and to reign them back in lies in the awareness to drop back into the breath, detached from the person or thing that seems to be causing the emotional outburst or release. Clarity came back to me, and I realized I was wasn’t breathing

and when I did my chest felt tight and not dropped into my belly like normal. The energy in the room had become tense and I felt compelled to address the moment before moving on.

I breathed deep, found my place back in the room, and respectfully asked our production manager, Julie, if I might be able to say something before we moved on to our next item of business. As I began to speak, I was aware that I wanted to choose my words carefully, as not to add any more tension to the room. In *Words Can Change Your Brain*, Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman say, “We use our words to express our wounds, and we use our words to heal. Thus it makes great sense that we train our voices to speak warmly, with confidence, empathy, and hope” (139). With that in mind, I casually checked in with the room, asking if everything was “cool” and acknowledging that I felt the energy had gotten a little strange. “When someone does something you do not like, open your heart before you speak. If you choose to make a statement, offer it as something you feel rather than something someone did” (Roman, 61). I mentioned that I noticed Miguel’s voice had gotten loud, but didn’t feel it was coming off in an aggressive manner, and that I found Webster’s body language becoming defensive and guarded. They both agreed that the moment was fine and that there wasn’t any contention. This was a pleasure to hear because negative energy and tension doesn’t serve the way I like to work.

My processes flourish when all my collaborators know they are being heard and feel confident that we are all in it together. Reflecting on *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*, Romero says, “This production experience underlined that for me critical thinking is

the most important quality a theater artist can have. I feel confident in being true to myself, trusting my impulses, and see no need to modify my behavior” (M. Romero, personal communication, April 25 2015). I couldn’t agree more that critical thinking is also essential to our process. As an amazing scenic designer and dedicated faculty member, Miguel has and always will have my deepest respect. I have always had a wonderful time working with him, and I credit this to the very fact that he is true to himself and his impulses. In that situation, I wasn’t suggesting there was a need for any behavior modification. I merely felt the moment called for a pause to take note of the reactivity swirling in the room. As Miguel recalls from the event, “I can remember being impatient with an inexperienced prop or lighting designer and you jumped in as if to protect the other person from my impatience. Impatience is my Achilles heel. Mindfulness helps me become aware of this” (personal communication, April 25, 2015). It wasn’t my intention to protect anyone. I have worked with Miguel several times in the past and I simply didn’t want newer collaborators to interpret the impulsivity with anger. I don’t expect everyone to agree with each other every step of the way but I do want to encourage mutual respect of one another, and I try to lead by example. Miguel states poignantly, “It is good to know that in spite of artistic differences respectfully disagreeing with colleagues remains a key to theatremaking” (personal communication, April 25, 2015). This is why I try to keep communication open and flowing with a “green light.” It is vital to the work we do as theatremakers. Mindfulness is not only an effective tool to enhance it, but a beautiful one, as well. Thich Nhat Hanh says:

The more you practice mindfulness, the more you'll see things you can do to change your work environment in a positive way. When we practice mindful speech and deep listening, our way of communicating becomes a bell of mindfulness for everyone (*The Art of Communication*, 124).

CHAPTER 6

SHIFTING NEGATIVES INTO POSITIVES

The fourth and final concept, or principle. I feel my theatremaking benefits from Shifting Negatives Into Positives. I am a big proponent of the idea that one can shift their energy and attention away from a place of negativity and suffering to a place of positivity and compassion. I feel that as a culture and society we have been force-fed the idea that we can't cultivate our own happiness. If we do, then it must be short-lived because obviously no one is deserving of true happiness. It is crucial for us as theatremakers to become aware that we are responsible for shaping and creating the narrative of our experiences. Without this awareness, how can we shift experiences for our audiences? In *Words Can Change Your Brain*, Newberg and Waldman say, "The brain, it turns out, doesn't distinguish between fantasies and facts when it perceives a negative event. Instead it assumes that a real danger exists in the world" (24). They go on to say, "Any form of negative rumination—for example, worrying about your financial future or health—will stimulate the release of destructive neurochemicals " (25). Even more so, "Negative thinking is also self-perpetuating: the more you are exposed to it—your own or other people's—the more your brain will generate additional negative feelings and thoughts" (25). Having this awareness is vital because it allows us to choose the status quo or break free of the shackles that bind us to negative thoughts and feelings. Newberg and Waldman state:

By redirecting our awareness to setting positive goals and building a strong, optimistic sense of accomplishment, we strengthen the areas in our frontal lobe that suppress our tendency to react to imaginary fears. Not only do we build neural circuits relating to happiness, contentment, and life satisfaction, we also strengthen specific circuits that enhance our social awareness and our ability to empathize with others. This is the ideal state in which effective communication can prosper (26).

Negative images or thoughts are usually by-products of our past and keep us from being fully present. With this awareness, we can shift our attention and focus on creating and shaping our lives and experiences into positive opportunities. But first, we must start to reshape how we speak to ourselves:

The right words, spoken in the right way, can bring us love, money, and respect, while the wrong words—or even the right words spoken in the wrong way—can lead a country to war. We must carefully orchestrate our speech if we want to achieve our goals and bring our dreams to fruition (Newberg and Waldman, 3).

Practicing mindfulness has shifted my attention to this way of thought. By cultivating mindfulness, I became aware of the positive results occurring during rehearsal for both of my productions, applied in different ways but central in intention. My application of optimistic rewiring in the rehearsal hall recognizes that an inner critic who can hold us back creatively and emotionally plagues each of us.

Having this awareness can allow an artist to let go and open themselves up to the joys of unlimited possibility.

A New Brain: Critical Heads of the New Brain

Having never directing a musical before, I knew the process of *A New Brain* would be a series of firsts. The idea of working with a musical director and choreographer was exciting and strange. Having a cast of student actors whose passion for musical theatre far exceeded my own made me a bit apprehensive. If it hadn't been for my mindful awareness practice, I could have easily fallen into the trap of listening to the negative chatter that crept into my head from time to time. Instead, I kept reminding myself to relax, breath, and enjoy the experience for what it was: a gift of learning something new. "Learning something new involves a period of doubt. So it is important not to get discouraged, to recognize doubt for what it is—just doubt" (Smalley and Winston, 202). By recognizing this unavoidable period self-doubt sooner rather than later, I was able to shift the apprehension that I was feeling into excitement and positivity. Smalley and Winston say, "The development of positive emotion is rooted in the underlying principle born by the science of neuroplasticity. What you practice you will cultivate" (134).

My cultivation of a deeper mindful practice provided me with a greater ability to step back from the perceptions of negative thought. By being present and in the moment, one can shift their actions in a positive direction. Smalley and Winston say, "With mindfulness, you increase your level of discernment—that is, your capacity to detect a thought before it becomes an action—and in this discernment you create a greater capacity to pause and choose among alternate actions" (177). By having the capacity to choose between alternate actions, why

would we, as theatremakers and artists, choose to focus on the negative?

Personally, I choose not to focus on the negative because that way of thinking and feeling gets in the way of my theatremaking process. “The moment a person expresses even the slightest degree of negativity, it increases in both the speaker’s and listener’s brains. Instead of getting rid of anger, we increase it, and this can, over time, cause irreparable damage, not only to relationships, but to our brain as well” (Newberg and Waldman, 17). Working with student actors both in production and in the classroom setting, I have noticed the inner critic constantly dominating their thoughts and actions. This dominating voice more often than not speaks to them in the negative, rather than the positive. If they can silence that voice and redirect their energy, imagination and intuition can take over. As I began the rehearsal process for *A New Brain*, I knew that this would be an issue I would face and need to address.



Figure 9: Roger teasing Gordon

The way I chose to take action and help my performers rewire themselves for optimism in *A New Brain* was to incorporate a “check in” at the end of every evening. We would all share a positive affirmation from the evening’s rehearsal and set a future goal or intention. I found this practice to be quite helpful at the end of a long evening. Most night’s scenes would be played and adjusted several ways to explore different actions and intentions. I began to notice my performers being more focused on “getting it right” than exploring the hidden possibilities within the story.

Early in the process, one of my performers was notorious for constantly saying, “I don’t know what I am doing.” From his body language, I could always tell when he was lost in thought on stage. He would listen to the inner critic that crept into his head rather than his scene partners, at times standing on stage almost as if in a catatonic state. “The emotional body has the most to gain from reframing everything into the positive, for every time you say a negative word to yourself or make yourself wrong, your emotional body changes its vibration and your energy drops” (Roman, 36). I could tell he was becoming frustrated with himself. To ease his anguish, we would stop at the end of a scene to shake things off. While taking a “breather”, we would casually discuss the given circumstances and the actions he intended to play. I reassured him that his intuition was steering him in the right direction and encouraged him to keep exploring. I told him if something didn’t feel “right”, it was okay. In fact, that would be a great thing because it would offer him an opportunity to try something new. I tried to convey to him the understanding that dwelling on an “unsuccessful” action kept him thinking in the past and not engaged in the moment. I reminded him that we were rehearsing a play and it’s

supposed to be fun. A collaborator on the process mentions, “There will always be moments of frustration, but keeping those times fleeting moments instead of hanging on to negative energy for hours, days, weeks opens up to conversation and resolution. You have a wonderful way of refocusing both your energy and the energy of others and quickly and respectfully moving forward” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 19, 2015). Shifting his attention in that direction allowed him to have fun and experience the scene. Opportunities developed once he took the focus off himself and onto his scene partner. He was so busy in the present moment that he didn’t have time to listen to the voice of his critical mind. In his book *A Sense of Direction*, William Ball says, “Those who cannot relinquish the stranglehold that their critical judgment exercises over their wayward impulses are probably locked in an ego-bind” (18). Fortunately, my actor was able to embrace those moments as they occurred, and instead of going on automatic pilot down the path of negativity he developed the positive awareness of alternate possibilities.

I never want my rehearsals to feel like a test. It’s not about who has the most well-thought out actions and intentions. It’s about who can put themselves out there, lay everything on the line, and commit to using their imagination and creativity. When judgment sneaks into an artist’s process, planting seeds of doubt, mindlessness takes over and causes confusion and fear. As a result negativity takes over turning on an actors automatic pilot allowing them to lose presence on stage. With mindful awareness, an actor can sense that negative voice creeping in and say, “No, I will not allow you to rob me of the fun of experiencing a performance that is fully present and in the moment.”

Life is full possibilities and we are the authors of our stories. That's why I like to work with actors and other theatre artists. I feel that I am able to plant the seed of positivity and possibility. It is rewarding to work as a guide in an individual's process, especially as they begin to redirect their energy and shift how they speak to themselves. When frustration and tension mounts up, I guide them to experience it for what it is, take it in, and realize that moment has already passed. Let it go, say yes to the next impulse intuition offers, and appreciate the opportunity to try something new.

The approach I took with the aforementioned actor was standard with the rest of the cast. As the weeks went by, our evening reflections shifted to thoughts and feelings of excitement and possibility. Taking a moment with the cast each night to speak a bit about what they felt was working and where they wanted their next steps to go was refreshing. It was not only illuminating for me but for them, as well. When asked how beneficial the nightly check in was, cast member Jordan Reed responded, "I found it helpful because it [kept] me in check, like a mental list. I was able to remain aware of my goals and then work on them. As well, it helped build a relationship with the cast because we were able to gather together and share our thoughts." By doing this, I witnessed greater ensemble-building as they began to collectively *own* the rehearsals. It was a delight to watch and help steer. Thinking back on how much they began to empower each other and themselves reminds me of a quote of Sanaya Roman's: "Honor your challenges, for those spaces that you label as dark are actually there to bring you more light, to strengthen you, to firm your resolve, and bring out the best in you" (*Living with Joy*, 192).

Dead Man's Cell Phone: Opening Up and Inviting In Success In

Similar to *A New Brain*, Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone* was a style of play that I had not previously directed. With the production starting on the heels of the musical, I was not as prepared for the process as I would have liked. To temper the anxiety I felt, I chose to take the energy I felt from the musical and redirect it into positive self-talk for *Dead Man's Cell Phone*. Smalley and Winston define positive self-talk as, "a kind of thinking you use to counteract other kinds of thinking in order to soothe yourself, regulate your emotions, or generally bring some wisdom to the part of your mind that may seem out of control" (184). I reminded myself that it was fine that I did not have all the answers to the show processed in my mind. Instead, I accepted it as a moment of possibility and opportunity, and not as a problem. I felt comforted by the guiding principle of William Ball: "In the creative process, we have a shift in thought. We no longer have problems, we have challenges. We no longer have troubles, we have opportunities" (*A Sense of Direction*, 50). I was embarking on a creative journey I had never experienced before, but I was comforted by the knowledge that failure breeds success.

I could have easily fallen into a state of creative paralysis if it wasn't for my practice of mindfulness. I redirected my attention by focusing on the beauty of the story. The script's poetic nature and sense of space drew me in immediately. It gave me the intention to open my mind and imagination to the creative possibilities a talented cast and production team could offer. I was inspired to ask how a two-way road of communication could serve the production best. Thich Nhat Hanh says, "We

all have to look into ourselves to identify our deepest desires and aspirations. Our deepest desire is a source of nourishment, giving us the fuel and energy to live” (*Work*, 18). Once I had identified the intentions I had for the production, I felt great relief. I wanted to promote mindfulness by being mindful myself throughout the process, as well as explore the positive impact it could have when we, as a group, set our own intentions and face our fears.

One way I cultivated this was to host individual one-on-one meetings with the cast. I asked them a series of questions regarding their fears, goals, and known challenges they felt that they faced. I also wanted to know what steps they planned on taking to address these challenges, fears, and goals and how they thought I might be able to help them along in their journey. Creating that open dialogue from the start of the rehearsal process was quite helpful. It allowed me to listen and respond to their goals and fears in the moment. By letting them know that I was there for them on their path and ready to assist them, I was setting the groundwork for trust. As William Ball says, “Fear is the primary enemy of creativity. When an actor approaches his [their] role, it is always with some degree of fear” (44). As I sat with each of cast member, I practiced deep listening and took in the authentic selves they shared with me. It was very helpful for me to hear how I could aid their individual experiences and process my intentions to create a production *with* them and not *for* them. They were not cast for their talent alone. They each had glimmering possibility and potential that I saw beneath the surface of their auditions. I witnessed, from each of them, the potential they had to let go and give over to creative expression, which is something that I felt the story truly needed.

“Every human act is a creative act. There is no such thing as a noncreative act. Everything that happens is directly responsible to creativity. Every human event has been imagined into existence. The most enjoyable activities are the ones in which intuitive brain participates in a congenial way” (Ball, 18).

I wanted the cast to realize that I appreciated not only their intellect, but their intuition, as well. This is why I felt having an opportunity sit and process one-on-one was so important. We shared time focusing on the positive aspects of the collaboration and trivialized or demystified any negatives. I challenged them to let go of thoughts and feelings they had associated with past performances and exposed them to the realization that negative thinking wouldn’t serve the work on which we were about to embark.



Figure 10: Jean and Hermia

As I worked my way through the cast members, I could not help but notice how invigorating our conversations were. “Brain-scan research shows that

concentrating and meditating on positive thoughts, feelings, and outcomes can be more powerful than any drug in the world” (Newberg and Waldman, 35). Hearing from them what they found exciting, interesting, and challenging about the production was extremely rewarding. It opened the door to collaboration and communication. I didn’t realize, at the time, that those positive discussions would really enhance the production and further expand my cultivation of mindfulness. I no longer felt like I was *doing*, but *being* mindful. Simply being in that state of mindful awareness while living each moment with curiosity and compassion allowed things to keep falling into place. “If you focus on bringing out the good in other people, seeing their beauty and speaking to them of what you love about them, you will find areas which were giving you problems beginning to resolve themselves, even though you haven’t worked directly on finding solutions” (Roman, 37). My “action” for the production process was to create a production for everyone that was fueled by imagination, compassion, and communication. I feel that our collective ability to open up and process with one another demonstrated power of positive potential. I feel that was what made *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* a success.



Figure 11: Jean and Dwight

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The MFA Directing Program at University of Massachusetts Amherst provided me space to grow and explore my process as a director. When I came into the program three years ago, I was confident in knowing what I did not know. I was eager for the opportunity to fill in those gaps with knowledge I felt was missing from my own work as a theatremaker. It has been a challenging and rewarding process, and an artistic experience I will always treasure. With an outstanding faculty, eager student body, and a well-picked group of graduate collaborators, the UMass Department of Theater created and offered many opportunities for me to open up artistically. I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to devise theatre, write a grant and produce/direct my own independent project, as well as direct three Main Stage productions. All of those experiences helped deepen my practice and hone my skills as a collaborative theatremaker.

What made this experience such a rewarding journey was that it served as an artistic rebirth. I have rediscovered my voice and spirit. Coming into the program, I lacked a certain level of confidence. I was holding myself back from seeing the strong artistic leader that others realized me to be. My internal self-critic was stuck in a repetitive pattern. It was narrating that I was neither intelligent enough nor well educated enough to be an accomplished or skillful director. Fear crept in and plagued my mind and spirit. It was telling me that my work wasn't good enough and that it lacked creativity, imagination, and depth. My "hinge moment" occurred in

2011 when I was passed over for a directing gig with my own theatre company in favor of an outside director. It was then I knew I needed a change. Thinking back to that period in my development, I realize now how stuck I was in an artistic, emotional, and personal rut. I had lost my voice to express and process how unhappy I felt. Applying to the Masters program was the revitalizing first step I needed to take on the path to personal growth and artistic enlightenment. During my time here at UMass, I soon discovered that where my imagination ends, the journey of creation begins.

This graduate experience has created room for me to grow, discover and embody my process. It also served to highlight, for me, how my practice of Mindfulness renders me an effective theatremaker. Being aware of the present moment without judgment has been a valuable component in my personal and artistic way of life. I am truly grateful for how my artistic and spiritual paths have found one another, and realize now that they are not mutually exclusive. Reaching this place of clarity has been refreshing. I joked with friends that time in graduate school is equivalent to being at a Buddhist monastery. No longer do I find that funny because it taints the experience. These last three years have provided me with many opportunities to look inward and rediscover who I am. They have helped to reveal what inspires and motivates my journey toward a higher purpose. The mentorship I have received from faculty and staff has unlocked ideas, thoughts, and passions in me about how my process can give back to community, society, and humanity as a theatremaker.

The two productions I directed for the Department of Theatre's 2014-2015 season, *A New Brain* and *Dead Man's Cell Phone* culminated in case study framed within my thesis, *Mindful Theatremaking*. I explored my journey and practice of mindfulness, as well as how its influence has led my directorial process in ways that benefit the theatremaking model. My goal was to discover answers to the questions: Can leading a theatrical process with mindfulness-based practice provide an experience of extreme satisfaction among its collaborating artists? Can leading a theatremaking process with mindfulness promote stronger effectiveness in the level of communication and cooperation amongst collaborators? To reveal answers to these questions I created two nonscientific-based surveys. I realize that such opinion-based survey models reflect the views of only those who responded, but nonetheless, I find the results encouraging.

Using a scale method with one being lowest in satisfaction and effectiveness and ten as highest, I asked both productions teams of *A New Brain* and *Dead Man's Cell Phone* the following three questions: Compared to other productions you have been involved with in the Department of Theater at UMass Amherst, how would you rate your overall experience? How would you rate the level of communication and cooperation? How would you rate the level of trust and support you felt from the productions director (me)?

In *A New Brain* 83% of those responded noted extreme satisfaction in their overall experience working on the production, and with *Dead Man's Cell Phone* 96% noted the same level of satisfaction. In regards to the question of effectiveness of communication and cooperation 82% of *A New Brain* responders noted extreme

effectiveness and 93% with *Dead Man's Cell Phone*. Lastly, when asked about the level of trust and support they felt from me, their director, 90% of those who responded from *A New Brain* noted above average support, while a full 100% of those who responded from *Dead Man's Cell Phone* felt above average support. These findings show that, as a Mindful Theatremaker, I have been able to cultivate greater satisfaction and stronger levels of communication and cooperation. By steering and embodying the concepts of Mindful Decision Making, Mindful Listening and Loving Speech, and Shifting Negatives Into Positives within our production model, I feel I have found great success.

I found practicing Mindful Decision Making to be quite helpful because it offered me time to cultivate an inner calm before reacting with snap judgments or jumping to mindless conclusions. Having time to reflect allowed the distance and space I needed in order to take in all sides of an issue. That approach made it easier to weigh-out pros and cons. This then provided me with the foresight to how others would be affected by any one decision I made. Being armed with that awareness and reflection created more confident decision-making in my process.

Incorporating Mindful Listening and Loving Speech provided wonderful opportunities to explore the power of present-moment awareness. To differing degrees, we often get lost in thoughts and caught up in emotions while in production mode. It is our choice whether or not we attach ourselves to those thoughts. By increasing awareness of these two principles, I have been able to listen more deeply and with greater body awareness in order to help guide and redirect how I handle communication. It is important to choose words carefully and speak from a place of

compassion. If we modeled that understanding, we could reduce quite a lot of unnecessary pain and suffering that miscommunication creates. Miscommunication can be a powerful and unnecessary byproduct of the negative storytelling created by the inner-critic who constantly judges and second-guesses our thoughts and intuition. It is almost as if we are hardwired to think negatively without realizing the harm it actually has on us. By controlling our narrative, we can start to see things as what they really are: opportunities. Shifting Negatives Into Positives can greatly impact how artists create and collaborate on a theatre production. By saying “yes” or “I don’t know” more often offers more opportunities to share and discover what may or may not work. Opening a process up to that way of experimenting has its rewards. A director must realize and be aware that theatremaking is a collaborative art fueled by the creativity, imagination, and inventiveness of its artist. In a theatremaking process, if collaborators are told “no” or shut down too often, the director will risk creating an environment filled with ill will. Left untreated, mindlessness can breed continued frustration, tension, anger and miscommunication, all of which are antithetical to collaboration. This way of working may not be everyone’s cup of tea, but for me using these concepts and witnessing the success of each show is encouraging. Leading my theatremaking process with mindfulness has benefits that create, nurture, and inspire artistic growth and expression, especially for emerging artists.

I am not sure what the future holds for me, nor am I worried. Instead I will enjoy the present moment. I do know that I am interested in further instruction and education on mindfulness, either through enrollment in a Certificate program or by

obtaining a M.A. in Mindfulness Studies at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. With more study and training, I would like to create workshops and organize retreats for artists, theatremakers, and educators who have an interest in incorporating mindful practices into their work and art. Also, I am interested in working with or creating a Mindful Arts-based theatre organization. I will direct, perform, and continue my research and study of how mindfulness can impact and benefit our theatre community. The way I see it, my life and career is just starting and anything is possible, and the MFA Program at University of Massachusetts Amherst provided the platform, opportunity, and space to make this discovery.

APPENDIX

PRODUCTION TEAM SURVEYS

A New Brain Production Team Questionnaire

1. What does mindfulness mean to you?

2. Were you aware that mindfulness was guiding our work on *A New Brain*? If so, at what point did you find yourself aware? Did that alter or change your perception of the work we were doing at any time during the process?

3. As we worked collaboratively through the many stages of our production process, did you ever encounter moments where you “let go” of a preconceived notion or a desired outcome? If so, what was that experience like for you? Did it manifest in anger or resent, liberation or freedom? In retrospect, did it allow room for more avenues of dialogue and communication?

4. Early in the process I articulated my intention for how we would work and process as a collaborative team by saying:

“The work on this show is pure and honest collaboration. I’m not f***ing around, everything is fair game, it’s not my show, your show, or even the departments show; it’s OUR show. We are creating this together. I’ve got a way I see things and I’m gonna tell you, and then you all will say to me “yes! And what about this...” and I’ll say either “Hell yeah!” or “Dude, I like it I see where you’re coming from let me sit on it for a night.” There is NO right or wrong if we are all creating together, it’s all possibility and we’ll cross off what we don’t like after trying it all and exploring.”

Do you feel that setting out that intention early on helped guide our actions toward creating a “pure and honest collaboration?” If so, what way or ways did it benefit your process amongst the rest of the production team?

5. On a scale from 1-10 (1 being not satisfied, 10 being extremely satisfied) could you answer the following: Compared to other productions you may have been involved with in the Department of Theater at UMass Amherst, how would you rate your overall experience? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

6. On a scale from 1-10 (1 being not effective, 10 being extremely effective) could you answer the following: Compared to other productions you may have been involved with in the Department of Theater at UMass Amherst, how would you rate the level of communication and cooperation amongst the production team of *A New Brian*?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

7. On a scale from 1-10 (1 being below average, 10 being above average) could you answer the following: Compared to other productions you may have been involved with in the Department of Theater at UMass Amherst, how would you rate the level of trust and support you felt from the productions director? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

8. Lastly, moving forward as a theatremaker and artist did you discover anything new about yourself and/or process? If so what? Do you plan on using any newly found awareness on future projects to come?

Dead Man's Cell Phone Production Team Questionnaire

1. What does mindfulness mean to you?
2. Was it noticeable I was integrating my mindful awareness practice and my directorial process on Dead Man's Cell Phone? If so, did you find the experience to be positive or negative? Would you be able to elaborate on any impact it may have had on our collaboration?
3. Two principles I attempted to cultivate a deeper awareness were Mindful Listening and Loving Speech. How successful was communication during the process? Either in production meetings, hallway discussions, rehearsals, or tech did you find my speech to be truthful, thoughtful, and/or non-divisive? While in conversation did you feel your thoughts, ideas, impressions, and/or concerns at any stage the process heard and understood?

Can you recall any instances that might have stood out?

4. Mindful Decision Making was another principle that I explored. As I steered Dead Man's Cell Phone did you feel an intention on my part to handle situations less impulsive and reactive but rather with equanimity (even-

mindedness or balance)? Did you find me seeking consult and opinions from collaborators and mentors? Or firing from the hip and attempting to fix things solo?

What was your experience with either?

5. The last principle that I explored was Rewiring for Optimism/Reshaping Negative Thoughts. Are there any moments you recall where a situation that could have gone array seemed to change energy toward a more positive and productive outcome? If so, in your perspective what was the trigger?
6. On a scale from 1-10 (1 being not satisfied, 10 being extremely satisfied) could you answer the following: Compared to other productions you may have been involved with in the Department of Theater at UMass Amherst, how would you rate your overall experience? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
7. On a scale from 1-10 (1 being not effective, 10 being extremely effective) could you answer the following: Compared to other productions you may have been involved with in the Department of Theater at UMass Amherst,

how would you rate the level of communication and cooperation amongst the production team of *Dead Man's Cell Phone*? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

8. On a scale from 1-10 (1 being below average, 10 being above average) could you answer the following: Compared to other productions you may have been involved with in the Department of Theater at UMass Amherst, how would you rate the level of trust and support you felt from the productions director? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

9. Lastly, moving forward as a theatremaker and artist did you discover anything new about yourself and/or process? If so what? Do you plan on using any newly found awareness on future projects to come?

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